

# Press Release



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## **African-Americans are a Part of Submarine Force History, Present and Future**

By JO2 Christina Shaw, COMNAVSUBFOR Public Affairs

NORFOLK, Va. -- In February, the Navy's observance of African-American History Month celebrated not only the many contributions and accomplishments of African-Americans in the history of our nation, but also in the history of the United States Navy.

Even though they were only allowed to see limited combat, Africans-Americans who manned combat positions proved time and time again they were dedicated, skilled and professional. In the submarine force African-American's distinguished record became particularly apparent during World War II.

While the only rating available to African-American service members was in food service, many who served on submarines will tell you that they served in many more positions. African-American submariners were not only required to qualify in submarine warfare, but also served as helmsmen, planesmen, gunners and a number of other jobs.

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In an account by Edward L. Beach in his book “Salt and Steel Reflections of a Submariner,” he gave credit to Walter Pye Wilson, an African-American submariner, for steering the ship out of harm’s way during an attack by an enemy ship. Beach cited Wilson as not only a popular entity among the crew, but also one of the steadiest men aboard serving as chief wardroom steward. He was assigned to steer the boat at battle stations and his calming voice in stressful situations helped keep the crew calm.

In 1947, President Truman lifted the ban on rate application clearing the way for people like Carl Kimmons and Kilraine Newton to become the first African-American submarine “Mustangs” (slang for an enlisted sailor who receives a commission). Cmdr. Peter Tzomes (USN, Ret.) would eventually become the first African-American to command a nuclear submarine when he took command of the USS Houston (SSN 713).

In 1966 the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine USS George Washington Carver (SSBN 656) became the first submarine and second naval vessel to be named in honor of an African-American. By mid 1991, it carried out 73 patrols in the Atlantic and was finally decommissioned in March 1993. As of late 1998, nine naval vessels were named for African-Americans who have served their country honorably, whether by exploration, battle or scientific accomplishments.

For many African-American submariners, Black History month means even more. “Not many people get the opportunity to be a submariner and those [who] do are usually stereotyped,” said SK2(SS) Joske Thursby of Digsandy, Texas, a Sailor on the fast attack submarine USS Albany (SSN 753). “I’m just happy to have this opportunity. I don’t want to fail in front of my little boy [and I don’t want] my brothers to see me fail,” Thursby added.

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There are other memorable African-Americans who played key roles in the development of African-American submariners, as quoted in Glenn Knoblock's upcoming book "Black Submariners in the United States Navy- 1939 to 1975." Rear Adm. Mel Williams, Jr., a 1978 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and a second generation submariner who is also an African-American, has contributed the foreword to this upcoming book. His father, Master Chief Mel Williams, Sr., USN (Ret.), was a Navy Steward who served with distinction for 27 years in the submarine force as the Head Mess Management Specialist for the Secretary of the Navy and Chief of Naval Operations during the 1970's.

Others mentioned in the book include Anderson Royal, of Tulsa, Okla., who made seven war patrols during World War II and became a key factor in the development of the Electronic Warfare Technician; Albert Rozar of Macon, Ga., who made his first war patrol in 1941 and made five total; and Williams, Commander, Submarine Group Nine at Naval Base Kitsap Silverdale, Wash., and a member of a group of pioneers of the submarine force known as "The Centennial Seven."

The Seven are a group of African-American submariners who have commanded a submarine during the first 100 years of submarine service. Capt. Bruce Grooms, Commodore, Submarine Squadron SIX in Norfolk, Va., a member of the Seven, said February is a reminder of the importance of reflecting on the past.

"I think African-American history month is a great opportunity to reflect on our accomplishments as Americans and take a look at what African-Americans have contributed to our country and the submarine force," said Grooms, a 1980 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy.

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Present day African-Americans serving in the submarine force continue the tradition of honor, courage and commitment participating in missions that directly support the War on Terrorism, the tsunami clean up and rescue efforts and routine deployments to ensure America's safety.

For Thursby, African-American history month is about looking back on the struggles of his ancestors and being grateful for what he has now.

"We've come a long way. I want to show that I appreciate all the small things-- even though to them they weren't small, they were the right things to do," said Thursby.

"The submarine force has made important strides in its commitment to diversity within its ranks," Grooms added. "I take personal pride in being able to say I had the opportunity to serve in a force that is so strongly committed to its people."

Submariners like Thursby and Grooms plan to take full advantage of the freedoms that America has given them and carry on the traditions of their ancestors who had to fight for freedom. They also feel it is important to help those who come behind them.

"We (The Centennial Seven) meet each year to mentor and fellowship with a group of junior officers and midshipmen, selected to the nuclear power program with the goal of helping them benefit from our experiences," said Grooms.

Such mentoring efforts help retain quality people and to promote diversity within the submarine force.

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“The number of African Americans graduating with engineering degrees continues to grow, and we need to capture as much of that talent as possible,” said Vice Adm. Charles L. Munns, Commander, Naval Submarine Forces, and a 1973 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. “Diversity is a very important part of our undersea enterprise. It provides for a wider pool of quality candidates, more perspective on situations and in turn, better solutions.”

“We are more ready for the demands of our national defense with diversity than we would ever be without,” Munns concluded.

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